NRC NEWS

U.S. NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION

Office of Public Affairs Telephone: 301/415-8200
Washington, D.C. 20555-0001
E-mail: opa.resource@nrc.gov Site: www.nrc.gov
Blog: http://public-blog.nrc-gateway.gov

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Remarks of Chairman Allison M. Macfarlane,
U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission
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Thank you for the kind introduction. I'm honored to have the opportunity to address this important conference, having attended it regularly for many years.

One of the greatest benefits of this forum is that its attendees represent a broad range of perspectives and areas of expertise. As a result, we encounter viewpoints or information we may not otherwise have considered.

It's also gratifying for me to see a number of familiar faces and old friends.

As always, the agenda for this year's conference reflects a number of timely, significant topics. I've been fortunate to be involved in related discourse during my time in academia and on the Blue Ribbon Commission. It's been very interesting for me to come to the NRC, which plays an important role in fulfilling U.S. non-proliferation objectives through various critical aspects of its mission.

As you're all well aware, since the 2010 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference, there has been renewed emphasis on ensuring a mutually-reinforcing balance between the three pillars of the NPT – non-proliferation, disarmament, and peaceful uses of nuclear technology.

Today, I'd like to touch on the important role of regulators in ensuring safe and secure use of nuclear materials, thereby supporting the peaceful use of these materials.

The benefits of nuclear technology are far-reaching. It's important to remember that, although the proliferation concerns associated with nuclear power get a lot of specific attention, other peaceful uses of nuclear materials in commercial enterprise, medicine and academia provide an important societal benefit.

The civilian "nuclear landscape" has the potential to change considerably in the coming years. Some countries are seeking to expand small, existing nuclear power programs. Others are developed countries that have identified a need to diversify their energy mix. Still others, which the IAEA says have expressed at least some interest in nuclear power, still have significant work ahead of them just to establish basic critical infrastructure.

The advent of small modular reactor designs could lead to the introduction of nuclear power in places with small or regional grids that may not have otherwise considered it.

The development of any major new technological advancement can come with competing or conflicting objectives. Nuclear technology can improve people's health and livelihood. It's therefore understandable that governments would want to put access to these technologies on a fast track. However, if these goals outpace the development of regulatory controls, nuclear safety, security, and environmental protection may be jeopardized.

It's essential that we emphasize the responsibilities that accompany the use nuclear technology for peaceful purposes.

Regulatory bodies like the NRC have a critical role to play in this discussion, which is inextricably linked to the peaceful uses commitments under the NPT. Regulators provide a critical function in the global non-proliferation regime by ensuring the safe and secure use of nuclear materials and technology.

I believe we must do more to dispel the notion that regulatory controls are a bureaucratic impediment designed to limit or hinder rightful access to peaceful uses, when the opposite is true.

Strong and effective regulatory controls enhance the efficiency with which nuclear materials can be safely and securely used.

A lack of import and export controls may delay shipments of nuclear materials from reaching their destinations or allow diversion into the wrong hands.

Absent regulatory oversight of nuclear power plant construction, the final product may not adhere to the codes and standards necessary to ensure that the plant is constructed and operated safely.

Failure to provide proper training to medical technicians can lead to patient or worker overexposures.

Each of these scenarios not only impacts access to peaceful uses of nuclear technology, but has safety, security, and non-proliferation implications as well.

To that end, I believe regulators must play a significant role in the NPT community by bringing regulatory perspectives into the broader government nuclear safety, security, and non-proliferation policy decision-making.

The highest levels of government must make nuclear safety and security a priority. Regulators must have confidence that their decisions will be given due weight by country leadership, while preserving their independence – something I will touch on more in a moment.

This is a key element in ensuring that these issues maintain a direct connection to the broader non-proliferation regime, and that the rights and responsibilities associated with peaceful uses are duly considered and well understood.

Many countries with established regulatory programs are already in a position to increase their involvement in these important discussions. For countries embarking on new programs, I believe we have an obligation to provide insights about the regulatory development necessary to make that program safe, secure, and successful.

All countries that wish to use nuclear technology for commercial purposes must develop the appropriate infrastructure to ensure the safety and security of their program. This includes a strong, independent, well-funded regulatory body.

For countries considering nuclear power, responsible development also includes an industry that is responsible for first line safety and security, recognizing the importance of quality assurance in all aspects of a plant's construction and operation.

On a related note, I believe that all countries considering nuclear power need to consider the ultimate disposal of their nuclear waste at the beginning of their planning, with a clearly-defined strategy for waste management and disposal integrated in the licensing process.

In addition, establishment or expansion of a nuclear power program must include input from all interested parties in a transparent and carefully-cultivated dialogue.

Within the regulatory community, we have networks available to give countries with emerging civilian nuclear programs the assistance necessary to establish an effective regulatory infrastructure, thereby facilitating their safe and secure use of nuclear materials and technology.

We also work together with emerging countries to ensure that they have a common understanding of their obligations related to importing and exporting nuclear materials, so that these materials will be appropriately protected.

In the United States, the NRC plays an important role in implementing U.S. government non-proliferation objectives. We apply IAEA safeguards at our licensed facilities; we maintain a robust security program; and we are responsible for licensing the import and export of nuclear materials and technology for civilian uses. We are actively engaged internationally with our regulatory counterparts, providing bilateral and multilateral assistance to emerging countries.

The NRC's international engagement plays a significant role in informing our work. There is a lot to learn from what others are doing. This has been proven to us time and again, particularly in the operating experience area. Conferences like this are also important for the same reason – I know there are quite a few NRC people here today.

Regulatory bodies provide an essential perspective in the global non-proliferation discourse. I believe it is the absence of regulatory controls that impedes access to peaceful uses of nuclear technology, not the other way around.

The more we are able to advance that message, the greater the chances will be that nuclear materials are being used safely and securely worldwide. This, in turn, will contribute to the continued successful implementation of the NPT.

I am grateful for the opportunity to share my thoughts with you today, and now I welcome questions from Matt and others in the audience.

Thank you.